

THE EMPEROR OF THE LAST DAYS

A Study in Medieval Fanaticism

G. F. HUDSON

SOVIET Communism and German National Socialism as systems of political power both took the world by surprise. In 1914 nobody anticipated such developments in human affairs. In those days there were two significant rival ideologies, of which one appeared to be winning and the other to be on its way out—on the one hand, the creed of liberal democracy, and on the other that of dynastic absolutism, though the latter nowhere in Europe, not even in Russia, survived any longer in its pure form. There was indeed an international socialist movement aspiring to bring about some radical changes in the structure of society, but it appeared to be a force which in democratic countries found sufficient scope for its activity within the constitutional framework.

What could not be imagined at that time was that a major part in world affairs was soon to be played by organized bodies of men claiming to perform missions laid upon them by "history," utterly intolerant of any opinions opposed to their own, and ready to disregard every legal or customary human right in pursuit of their aims. When, however, the totalitarian regimes emerged in Europe, political observers did not fail to search for historical antecedents, and spiritual lineages going back a century or more were traced without much difficulty.

Bolshevism, by its own claim, went be-

yond the Social Democratic revisionists to the Marx of the *Communist Manifesto*, and the history of the French Revolution was always in the minds of its leaders. Similarly, analysts of the Nazi creed were able to trace its origins back through the German philosophers and historians of the 19th century to Gobineau, Fichte, and Herder. But one did not try to go back to the Middle Ages, for at first sight, in spite of the widely admitted fact that the fanaticism of the new political doctrines had a religious quality about it, there did not seem to be any significant continuity between the Christian faith and the very earthy and secular revolutions of our age.

It has been left to Professor Norman Cohn, in his study of certain medieval heresies under the title of *The Pursuit of the Millennium*,* to show that this was only a superficial view. It is here indeed, in teachings derived from the Book of Revelation and the Sybilline prophecies of the early Christian centuries, and in the emotions and acts evoked by these teachings, that the most striking and illuminating precedents for totalitarian states of mind are to be found. This is a little known branch of medieval studies—little known because the Catholic Church, and also the Protestants in the 16th and 17th centuries, were extremely successful in destroying the writings of heretics, and particularly of those who were regarded as subversive of the established social order, so that it is often a difficult matter today to find out what they did or did not believe.

Professor Cohn as a medieval scholar—he holds the chair of French at Magee College, Londonderry, in Northern Ireland—has

A GREAT deal of interest has been aroused by Professor Norman Cohn's newly published scholarly study, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, which finds illuminating parallels between aspects of modern totalitarianism and certain religio-political movements of the later Middle Ages. The subject is here discussed by G. F. HUDSON, a historian who teaches at Oxford. He is a frequent contributor.

*Essential Books, 492 pp., \$9.00.

spent years of research in gathering materials for his book, and it is an important contribution to knowledge in its own specialized field. It was not written primarily as a study in the origins of any contemporary faith. But the analogies were there, and as a man of his own time, the author became acutely aware of them. He recognizes the objections to drawing parallels between such widely separated epochs of civilization, but he nevertheless declares that "the more carefully one compares the outbreaks of militant chiliasm during the later Middle Ages with modern totalitarian movements, the more remarkable the similarities appear," and he claims that certain features common to Communism and National Socialism "are best elucidated by reference to that subterranean revolutionary eschatology which so often sent tremors through the massive structure of medieval society."

THE beliefs held in common by the various chiliastic sects of the Middle Ages can be reduced to four basic propositions. First, that human history was nearing a foretold climax, a great catastrophe to be followed by an age in which mankind would be perfectly good and perfectly happy. Second, that this consummation was opposed by the vast supernatural power of Satan and his earthly agents, whose dominion over the world would be at its worst and most oppressive in the period just before the beginning of the new age of virtue and felicity. Third, that there must be an elite of true believers who would be the active instruments of the divine purpose in destroying the powers of evil (by physical force where preaching was of no avail) and would establish on earth the "kingdom of the saints" under the rule of Christ himself. Fourth, that, whatever the tribulations and disappointments of the faithful, their ultimate victory was certain because it had been predestined by God and declared by prophecy.

There were, however, two distinct, though overlapping, traditions of this doctrine, which may be called the Johannine and the

Sibylline respectively. The former was based directly on the New Testament Book of Revelation, which reflected the Christian expectation of a victorious Second Coming in the near future, at a time when the Church was being persecuted by the rulers of the Roman Empire; in this version the secular imperial power was the enemy, and the victory of the saints was to be brought about by the direct intervention of Christ and the angels of God. The Sibylline prophecies, on the other hand, dated from a time when the Roman Empire had become Christian and the diabolical enemy was Islam, whose forces had overrun the Christian lands of Egypt and Syria; these later predictions centered on an "Emperor of the Last Days," who would lead the Byzantine armies to decisive victory over the Moslems. The new conception was a more relevantly political one in a world where the rival religions were identified with rival armies and governments, but it was not set up in contradiction to the earlier Johannine prophecy; the reign of the Emperor of the Last Days was supposed to be preparatory to the final struggle between God and Satan described in the Book of Revelation. There was nevertheless a tendency among the unlearned to confuse the earlier and the later deliverance, and this became stronger when the apocalyptic figure of the Emperor of the Last Days came to be linked with the "Holy Roman Empire of the German nation," and particularly with Frederick II, who ruled Germany and Italy in the first half of the 13th century and was involved in a bitter struggle with the Papacy.

The ideas and sentiments generated by the Johannine and Sibylline prophecies were not in themselves unorthodox; the Book of Revelation was part of canonical scripture, and there was nothing contrary to the faith in the expectation of a Christian emperor who would chastise the hosts of Mohammed. But almost inevitably the current of thought which looked forward to a world catastrophe and subsequent millennium of bliss and virtue on earth came into conflict with the established medieval

Church. The Church accepted the existing world with all its sinful imperfections as permanent for practical purposes and set itself for its main task, not the creation of a perfect, sinless society on earth, but the preparation of souls for life beyond the grave.

Those who were possessed by the vision of the earthly millennium, on the other hand, were impatient of the Church's compromises with unredeemed human nature and highly critical of the worldly preoccupations and complacency of the clergy. They tended to break away from ecclesiastical authority, to follow leaders of their own and to regard themselves as the elect, separated from ordinary sinful humanity and destined to be partakers in the coming Kingdom of the Saints. Moreover, these dreams produced strong inclinations to physical violence. Believers in the imminence of the millennium might indeed content themselves with lives of prayer and ascetic discipline, to make themselves worthy to be numbered among those who would survive the divine purification of the earth. But there were many whose belief took a more active form and who expected to be themselves agents of the purification. Before the millennium could begin the earth must be purged of all wickedness, and this meant the physical destruction of those who would not renounce their wickedness and submit to the exhortations of the elect.

The anticipated cleansing involved not merely individuals, but whole categories of people. In the first place, the earth must be rid of non-Christians, that is to say, Moslems and Jews. Secondly, the Christian clergy must be purged because they had failed to perform their divine mission and were unworthy of the Second Coming. And thirdly—though this was characteristic only of the later developments of the millenarian faith—the “rich,” whether noble or bourgeois, must be called to account, since the poor were the true people of God and the millennium would be an era in which all goods would be held in common.

The approach to the millennium was thus conceived as requiring not merely a

religious reformation, but also warfare against infidels and ultimately a thoroughgoing social revolution. The idea that the poor were to be God's specially chosen instrument for bringing in the millennium emerged at the time of the First Crusade. The Crusade was primarily an enterprise of barons and knights under the patronage of the Pope, and the participants, though animated by considerable religious fervor, pursued limited objectives within the framework of the politics of the day. But the crusading bands (known as *Tafurs*), recruited from the poorest classes, expected a miraculous consummation of the age with the taking of Jerusalem; they regarded themselves as “a people chosen by God, as the barons had not been chosen.” Under the influence of popular preachers the Crusade tended to transcend the limited objectives originally set for it and become a campaign for the extermination of unbelievers, which meant massacres of Moslems in Asia and of Jews at home.

FROM this time on the millenarian movements in Western Europe almost invariably involved anti-Jewish outbreaks. Professor Cohn points out that “the official crusading army, consisting of the barons and their retainers, had no part in this massacre [of 1096], which was carried out entirely by the hordes which formed in the wake of the *prophetae*.” According to these preachers, the extermination of the Jews was a prerequisite for the millennium; they were represented as the servants of Satan, who must be wiped out (or converted) before the Second Coming. The purgative wrath did not, however, stop at professed non-Christians; it soon came to be directed also against the Christian clergy whose sins were held to make Christendom unworthy of the promised deliverance.

Groups of laymen convinced that they were charged with the stupendous task of preparing the way for the millennium were indeed bound to challenge the authority of the official priesthood over the people, and sought to overcome it by denouncing its

corruption. The medieval Church provided plenty of scope for attack by agitators who practiced apostolic poverty, in contrast to the wealth of the bishops and above all of the papal court itself. The Moslem recapture of Jerusalem and the disastrous outcome of the Seventh Crusade led by Louis IX were attributed to God's wrath at the sins of the clergy. In 1250 the preaching of a renegade monk called Jacob led to the rising of the Pastoureaux, who dressed as shepherds because it was prophesied that the Holy Sepulcher would be liberated from the Saracens by Christian shepherds. The Pastoureaux, however, never reached Palestine, but devoted their energies to hunting down or killing or beating up the clergy all over France; eventually they were suppressed, but not without considerable bloodshed.

It was from about 1380, according to Professor Cohn, that the idea of the millennium underwent its final development, whereby it came to be regarded as an age of common ownership, the attainment of which would require the earth to be purged not only of Moslems, Jews, and unworthy clergy, but also of landlords and capitalists. This development was largely due to the heretical sects of the Brethren of the Free Spirit and the Adamites. The former were mystics who seem to have taken little interest in the millennium, but their teaching, that a man in union with God had a right to satisfy his needs with whatever God had created, was subversive of private property as a social institution. The Adamites held that the millennium would be a return to the primal innocence of man before the Fall, and that the most important condition for entering it was the abolition of all property rights. These doctrines contributed to the spread of the idea that the poor everywhere were destined to inherit the earth at the Second Coming, while the powerful and wealthy would be the objects of divine chastisement.

In the form in which it was most deeply influenced by Sibylline prophecy the idea of the millennium had national implica-

tions. The Emperor Frederick II became the object of eschatological expectations; at the height of his struggle with the Papacy it was predicted by wandering preachers that he would confiscate the wealth of the Church and distribute it to the poor. After his death it was widely believed that he was not really dead but had merely withdrawn from the world and would return in the fullness of time. This idea drew increasing strength in Germany from the disintegration of the Empire and the actual collapse of the imperial authority; in the chaos which Germany became during the 14th century there was a potent fascination in a myth which not only expressed a deep hostility to the Roman Church, but also predicted the world power of a German monarch and the supremacy of the Germans above all other nations. In the middle of the 15th century a chronicler wrote that many Germans "believe absolutely that the Emperor Frederick is still alive and will remain alive until the end of the world, and that there has been and shall be no proper Emperor but he."

A series of prophetic tracts described the coming triumph of the Emperor of the Last Days. One of them, the *Gamaleon*, tells, in Professor Cohn's words, "of a future German Emperor who is to overthrow the French monarchy and the Papacy. When he has accomplished his mission, France will be remembered no more, the Hungarians and Slavs will have been subjugated and reduced to complete dependence, Jewry will have been crushed for ever, while the Germans will be exalted above all peoples. The Church of Rome will have been expropriated and all its clergy killed. In the place of the Pope a German patriarch will preside from Mainz over a new church, but a church subordinate to the Emperor. . . . And those will be the Last Days before the Second Coming and the Judgment."

EVEN more grandiose and fanatical was the *Book of a Hundred Chapters*, written at the beginning of the 16th century "by an anonymous publicist who lived in

Upper Alsace or the Breisgau," and claiming to represent a communication from God to the author through the Archangel Michael. This work foretold the emergence of the Emperor Frederick from the Black Forest, riding on a white horse, his victories over all his enemies, and his reign for a thousand years. A brotherhood must be formed to support him on his arrival, and its members would be his ministers and agents in the government of the world. He would purge the earth of sin by vast massacres, particularly of corrupt clergy, moneylenders, and lawyers; all who opposed him or denied his mission were to be put to death. The poor would receive an abundance of cheap food, but the rich were to be expropriated, and rents and taxes would be paid to the Emperor alone for assignment according to his will. Once the earth had been purified by the initial extermination of evildoers, mankind must be kept in a state of perfect virtue by tribunals which would punish every kind of sin—particularly attempts by individuals to increase their possessions, and sexual misbehavior. People would be exhorted to confess their own sins and to inform against their neighbors. Those who repented would be let off with floggings, but those regarded as incorrigible would be put to death.

This messianic Emperor would be a German ruling from Germany over thirty-two subordinate kingdoms. According to the *Book of a Hundred Chapters*, Adam and all his descendants down to Japhet had spoken German; other languages had only come into existence at the Tower of Babel. Japhet had settled in Alsace, and his descendants had founded a great empire with its capital at Trier. The French and Italians had originally been subject peoples and would be so again under the Emperor from the Black Forest; the current weakness and humiliation of the Germans was due to their having been corrupted by the Roman Church and Venetian commercialism. As in the *Gamaleon*, the spiritual center of Christendom in the new age would be no longer at Rome, but at Mainz. The new Frederick

would, of course, reconquer Jerusalem, and all Jews and Moslems who did not renounce their faith were to be killed. By way of practical preparation for all this, the writer claims that he has discovered by means of alchemy the explosives which will enable the German messiah to conquer the world.

The *Book of a Hundred Chapters* was never printed and does not appear to have had any extensive influence; its importance, as Professor Cohn points out, is that of an extreme expression of a traditional eschatological belief which prevailed among the common people of South Germany at the beginning of the 16th century. The contents of this extraordinary work are, to quote Professor Cohn, "almost uncannily similar to the phantasies which were the core of National Socialist 'ideology.' One has only to turn back to the tracts—already almost forgotten—of such pundits as Rosenberg and Darré to be immediately struck by the resemblance. There is the same belief in a primitive German culture in which the divine will was once realized and which throughout history has been the source of all good, but which was later undermined by a conspiracy of capitalists, inferior non-Germanic peoples, and the Church of Rome, and which must now be restored by a new aristocracy, of humble birth but truly German in soul, under a God-sent saviour who is at once a political leader and a new Christ."

NEITHER the dream of an all-conquering German monarchy, nor the more widespread expectation of an anarcho-communist society to be established on earth by divine intervention, ever led to a decisive challenge to the medieval social and political order; when the great historic transformation took place, it assumed the form, on the one hand, of the Lutheran and Calvinist Reformation, which had no sympathy for millenarian hopes; and on the other, of the secularist, scientific, rationalist culture which was even more adverse to such beliefs. The medieval millenarian teachings nevertheless produced, in addition

to minor upheavals, two great outbursts of fanatical revolutionary aspiration which made their mark in history—the revolution of the Taborites in Bohemia between 1420 and 1434, and that of the Anabaptists in Munster in 1530-34.

The Taborites, who were the radical wing of the Hussites and were so called for their stronghold which they named Mount Tabor, dreamed of overrunning the whole world, for "the sons of God shall tread on the necks of kings, and all realms under heaven shall be given unto them." The Anabaptist outbreak of the following century was on a smaller scale and of shorter duration, but exhibited again most of the features characteristic of the Taborite revolution. It was distinguished from the latter most significantly by the emergence of an autocratic leadership, and this may well be attributed to the influence of the German belief in the reappearance of Frederick as Emperor of the Last Days. The Anabaptists in other places, whose attempts to relieve Munster were frustrated by the counter-action of the German princes and city authorities, were exhorted "to kill all monks and priests and all rulers that there are in the world, for our king alone is the rightful ruler."

The substitution in modern times of a secular, materialist metaphysic for Christian theology has not eliminated the essential quality of the millenarian state of mind. The will of God has been replaced by a hypostasized "history" to provide the certainty of ultimate victory—though for the Nazis the completeness of their military de-

feat now seems to have been fatal to their faith. The transformation which the millenarian heretics of the Middle Ages sought to accomplish—or help God to accomplish—was necessarily of universal scope because the conflict between God and Satan was a cosmic struggle which involved the whole of mankind. If the Taborites and Anabaptists did not overrun the world, it was due to lack of power and not to lack of will; their purposes were essentially unlimited and were thus of an entirely different order from the parochial expansionist schemes of medieval kings or the limited aims of baronial factions or merchant guilds.

Similarly, in modern times the spirit of totalitarian movements is fundamentally unlike that of ordinary politics based on the calculated interests of sectional social groups or of nation-states. A millenarian ideology must aim at domination of the world, for it is clearly out of the question for God to win in one part of the world while Satan prevails in another; "coexistence" can be at most a passing phase. Such an ideology must claim a total subordination of the individual, for in the crisis of human history anything less than complete acceptance of the divine will is mortal sin. In language strangely appropriate to the age of the hydrogen bomb the basic text of the millenarian tradition anticipates the consummation of human history:

"And lo, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood, and the stars of heaven fell onto the earth."

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